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The Quality of Governance in China: The Citizens' View

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The Quality of Governance in China

Organized by Francis Fukuyama

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The government of General Secretary Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao (2002-2012) has placed an emphasis on improving the quality of governance and service delivery, especially for those who have not benefitted so well from, or who have been disadvantaged by the reform program to date. This emphasis is encapsulated in populist slogans such as “putting people first” (*yiren weiben*) and “building a harmonious society” (*goujian hexie shehui*). At a systemic level, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has declared that it is no longer a “revolutionary” but rather a “ruling party” that needs to modernize and adjust its systems of management (CCP Central Committee 2005). Reforms have attempted to improve the quality of expert and even citizen input into the decision-making process and evaluation of local officials, and to improve the functioning of government agencies. Other reforms have sought to boost “inner-party democracy” but all measures stop short of providing institutionalized mechanisms for feedback and any notion of open, competitive politics.

Despite these reforms, one could argue that many of China’s core problems arise from deficiencies in governance. The system is riddled with corruption, a sure sign of poor governance, with officials abusing official position for personal gain and with the sale of government positions undermining the notion of promotion based on meritocratic principles. Many, if not most, of the local protests are caused by the improper or illegal actions of local officials. This includes the poor implementation of good national regulation at the local level (leading to environmental pollution or sale of substandard products), the illegal transfer of land that dispossesses or undercompensates farmers, and restricting access to public goods and services.

In comparative terms, China’s indicators are not too bad with the exception of “voice and accountability”. According to the World Bank’s Governance Indicators (Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi 2010 and web access http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/sc_chart.asp), China’s governing performance has not varied significantly since 1996 when the project began. Four of the six indicators rank in the 50th to 75th percentile. The exceptions are government effectiveness (60.7 in 2011) and voice and accountability (4.7 in 2011). Compared with other large developing countries and those with similar income levels, China’s

evaluation is favorable. However, as China strives in economic terms to emulate the “tiger economies” of East Asia and others that have escaped the “middle-income trap”, China still has a long way to go to improve its governance indicators (see **Table One**). Institutions lag behind economic growth and may become a drag on further growth. One could argue, of course, that the causality is unclear and that it is the rising incomes that lead to a need for improved governance rather than better government performance yielding higher per capita incomes.

Despite the lack of formal channels for citizen voice and accountability, citizens’ views and popular pressure are increasingly impacting on policy-makers. This can range from the pressure of ultra-nationalist groups on and off-line, to the rise of protests against local abuses of power to the increased use of social media to express views and spread “unofficial” news. Unlike during the pre-reform era, citizens are more willing and able to stake claims against the state in order to obtain better service from their government. The paternalism of the Maoist state retains a strong influence down to the present day but the “infantilization” of society is harder to maintain. It is difficult for the current leadership to maintain the view that their citizens are children who do not know what is in their best interests. Representation has usually meant presuming knowledge of individual and societal interest and therefore being empowered to take all important decisions on their behalf (Saich, forthcoming). However, increasingly citizens have different expectations of their government expecting it to provide them with the necessary resources to make better individual choices and to provide effective protection against the vicissitudes of the market.

The spread of new social media has expanded greatly “voice” for citizens and the CCP has invested heavily in policing and shaping the online messages (Yang 2009 and Fallows 2011). However, new social media provides a major challenge to a party that is used to traditional media controls and censorship, with hierarchy of information access that provides the basis for the exchange of secrets that can be traded for power and wealth. The danger is that a system of information control becomes dysfunctional leading to distrust of official media and online rumor is given greater credibility (Saich 2006). In our 2011 survey, 65.2 percent of respondents

expressed relative or extreme confidence in news transmitted on Sina Weibo, China's twitter equivalent, only a few percentage points lower than the Edelman annual global survey found for the media in China (73 percent, [trustbarometer2012in fographic.pdf](#)).¹ Sina Weibo was also seen by 56.7 percent as playing a role in combating corruption in the future and 36.6 percent definitely saw it as a medium for exposing corruption when it occurred. A further 46.7 percent noted that they might use Weibo to expose a corrupt action.

At the present time, these lacunae do not necessarily present insuperable problems for the CCP. It does not appear that a majority of citizens see the problems as systemic and our surveys suggest that the abuses are seen as local aberration rather than the consequence of central policy intent. The *Qiu Ju* mentality remains strong.² Second, government institutions have been remarkably flexible in accommodating new challenges and groups. The Chinese state is a "negotiated" one where each entity negotiates space and its relationship to others (see Saich 2000 and Saich and Hu forthcoming). For those entities that are successful in this negotiation, it allows them not only to survive but also often to prosper by using the facilities of the state to pursue their own objectives. Of course, some organizations are crushed while there is always the fear of state capture by vested interests. This has been argued most strongly for the capture of local government by Minxin Pei (2006) and recently there has been growing discussion of capture of national decision-making by vested interests. This is not necessarily an efficient mechanism for governing but it does provide a safety valve and a process for inclusion.

The main question is whether China's citizens are sufficiently satisfied to reduce potential challenges to CCP rule. It is reasonable to assume that if a significant percentage of citizens are more satisfied with government performance and the provision of public goods, the government will have a greater capacity for policy experimentation and enjoy a residual trust that may help them survive policy errors. Various writers have posited the relationship between citizen confidence in government and the capacity to implement laws and policies and reduce the need for coercion (see Hetherington 1998 and Warren 1999)

This paper asks three sets of questions. The first set asks about the general levels of satisfaction with government across different levels. Second, we ask about how citizens view the performance of local officials in dealing with the public and in implementing policy. Third, we look at the level of satisfaction with the provision of a number of specific goods and services, with a more in-depth look at dealing with corruption. In particular, it compares responses between those who live in major cities, small towns and townships, and villages. The findings are based on a survey that was conducted together with Horizon Market Research Company in the fall of 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009 and 2011. The survey is a purposive stratified survey ranging from 3,800 to 4,150 respondents selected from three administrative levels: city, town and village (for details see **Appendix One**). It is not a nationwide probability sample but comprises a number of sites selected on the basis of three variables: geographic location, average per capita income and population.³ Seven cities (eight from 2005) were selected together with seven townships and eight villages. Within each of the cities respondents were selected randomly through the household registration lists using the KISH method (Kish 1949 and *Survey Sampling* 1965). At the township and village levels because of the large average size of families, respondents were selected randomly through the closest birthday method. In terms of coverage, the surveys exclude two groups. They do not cover the migrant populations in the major cities, which make up significant percentages (in 2011, 35.9 percent of Beijing's population and 36.4 percent of Shanghai's), nor do they include China's autonomous regions as these have somewhat different policies for public goods provision. However, some data concerning rural migrants drawn from the 2008 China Comprehensive Social Conditions Survey (*Zhongguo shehui zonghe zhuangkuang diaocha*) is included below.

One advantage is that the survey does allow us to compare resident attitudes in cities, towns *and* villages within the sample.⁴ Since the 1950s when the Chinese state created a dual rural-urban society enforced through the household registration system (*hukou*), the two populations have been subject to quite distinct systems for the provision of public goods and services with more generous benefits for urban residents, especially those who were state sector employees. Reforms have loosened

these divisions rendering urban and rural more integrated than at any time since the early 1950s. There has been little research that compares satisfaction across the urban-rural divide. Certainly, urban residents receive better service but does this lead them to be more satisfied? The uncertainties that reforms have brought and the removal of some benefits may have caused a rise in dissatisfaction. By contrast, rural inhabitants have experienced a major collapse in collectively provided goods and services that the leadership has tried to repair in recent years. Across the board, not only does place of household registration matter but also level of income in terms of access to important goods such as education and healthcare. With rising migration, rural residents have learned more about conditions in the urban areas and this might lead to increased frustration with their lot. Are different government services perceived differently dependent on whether one lives in a major city, a town or the village and does this affect what residents expect from their local government? Such questions allow us to speculate on the long-term stability of CCP-rule as it is reasonable to presume that widespread deep dissatisfaction will undermine regime support.⁵

The Mountains are High and the emperor is far Away: Disaggregating the State

Rather than contemplating extensive reform of the Leninist system, General Secretary Hu has placed emphasis on improving the quality of local officials and trying to inspire in them a moral notion of what it means to be a “good communist.” This draws on a selective reading of China’s Confucian heritage and its application by former head of state Liu Shaoqi (1939), something for which he was roundly condemned during the Cultural Revolution. The Hu-Wen leadership has supported this by introducing policy measures to provide basic safety nets for Chinese society and to integrate migrants into urban services more effectively.

With respect to general satisfaction levels, there are two main findings. The 2011 survey confirms those of earlier years that respondents “disaggregate” the state and while they express high levels of satisfaction with the Central Government, satisfaction declines with each lower level of government. This view is confirmed by other surveys that have been conducted (Li and O’Brien 1996, Li 2004 and Li 2012).

Tianjin Shi's national survey (2001) found that citizens who might be wary of local governments may still trust the Central Government. A survey by Zhang Houan and his colleagues from Central China Normal University on trust in different levels of the party apparatus carried out between 1999 and 2001 shows a similar tendency (cited in Li 2012, p. 109),⁶ as does the China Survey for 2008.⁷ Our survey shows that this trend holds steady throughout the Hu-Wen administration. The findings imply that the disaggregation of the state with a benevolent center and an obstructionist local authority that many have observed in rural China also applies to urban China.

In 2011, 91.8 percent of respondents were either relatively or extremely satisfied with the work of Central Government (37.3 percent were extremely satisfied) but this dropped progressively to 63.8 percent at the local level (10.9 percent extremely satisfied) (see **Table Two**). This trend maps fairly closely with the China Survey 2008 on trust in leaders at different levels. In 2008, 44.6 percent had high level of trust in central leaders (37.3 percent extremely satisfied in our 2011 survey); 24.3 percent in provincial leaders (28.4 percent in 2011) and 17.1 percent in county/town leaders (14.6 percent in 2011). The fact that satisfaction declines as one gets closer to the people is problematic as local governments provide most public services and carry the heaviest financial burden, especially at the county and township level. The Maoist slogan of "self-reliance" reinforced the idea that each administration should minimize "dependence" on support from higher levels of government and this continued throughout the reform era. This has resulted in sub-national expenditures of 80 percent as a share of total public spending, a very high figure,⁸ and one that has risen from 52.6 percent when reforms began in 1978. This means that local governments are engaged in strategies to increase transfers from the central government or the next higher level of government or have to find ways to increase their own revenue base to meet their obligations. Sub-national levels of government provide 98.9 percent of spending on education, 98.4 percent on health, 94 percent on safety nets, and 98 percent on environmental protection (<http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjs/ndsj/2010/indexeh.htm>). Local

government finances in rural areas have become even tighter since the government converted all fees into the single agricultural tax in 2002 and then abolished the tax entirely in 2006.

The county level administration is being developed into the fiscal center for the rural areas and it is eclipsing the township. This expansion of responsibility has been conducted under the slogan of “taking the county as the lead” (*yixian weizhu*); spending at the county-level now accounts for about one-quarter of all public expenditures. Most important was the decision in 2001 to shift the fiscal responsibility for teachers’ salaries to the county from the township (*People’s Daily*, June 14, 2001). The number of respondents extremely satisfied with the performance of county government is just 14.6 percent, with a further 57.2 relatively satisfied. In part this may be related to lack of information. For example, only 8.2 percent of residents knew the name of the county magistrate.

The decline in level of satisfaction holds constant no matter where the respondent lives. Thus we find the phenomenon of declining satisfaction with government performance other scholars have documented throughout rural China, holds true for urban China while the rise in dissatisfaction is not so acute. At the lowest levels of government, satisfaction was relatively constant with the highest level of satisfaction among those living in small towns (68.7 percent extremely or relatively satisfied), 63.9 percent for those in major cities and 62 percent in the villages (see **Table Three**). This was a change from previous years where satisfaction of those living in the municipalities was the highest. Those living in the villages had the highest response rate for those extremely satisfied with the Central Government (45.2 percent), perhaps attesting to recognition of the measures introduced by Hu and Wen to improve the lot of rural communities.⁹ By contrast, only 26.6 percent of those living in major municipalities were extremely satisfied with the work of the Central Government.

The second major finding is that, on the whole the level of satisfaction with the work of government has risen across the board since the Hu-Wen administration began, rising to a peak in 2009 before dropping back slightly in 2011. A number of factors caused 2009 to represent a peak. The Summer Olympics

and the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic gave the government an opportunity to promote its global role and national achievements. The national government was also able to use the tragedy of the Wenchuan Earthquake to promote a positive view of its role as did its quick response to the 2008 financial crisis that resulted in a major stimulus package that significantly moderated the impact in China. However, by 2011 some of these positive effects had worn off and urban residents were affected by high housing prices, and all were affected by higher inflation and concerns about things such as food safety.¹⁰ The poor handling of the July 2011 Wenzhou high-speed rail crash might also have had a negative impact. The Edelman Trust barometer showed a drop in 2011 from 88 to 75 percent.

Satisfaction with the Central Government has remained consistently high (86.1 percent relatively or extremely satisfied in 2003 and 91.8 percent in 2011) while for the lowest levels of government it has risen from 43.6 percent to 63.8 percent. If we rank the responses from four to one for extremely satisfied to extremely dissatisfied, then the satisfaction index for Central Government rose from 3.16 in 2003 to a high of 3.41 in 2009 before dropping back to 3.30 in 2011. For township and village government and street committees it has risen consistently from 2.32 to 2.71 (see **Table Four**). The highest and lowest income groups tend to be those that are most satisfied. This would suggest that those with the highest income feel that they have done well under the current system and thus are relatively satisfied with the way that the government does it work. That there is higher satisfaction levels among the lowest income group suggests that they see central policy intent as being supportive of their interests.

While the consequences of these findings may raise concerns about the quality of local governance, they are not necessarily bad news for the Central government. The lower levels of satisfaction might be a potential indicator of social instability but the survey suggests that for our sample at least, citizens do not see the problems as lying with the Central government. This accords with the findings of others that while demonstrations, strikes and unrest may be daily occurrences in rural and urban China, the Central government retains a strong source of legitimacy.

Many would appear to see the problem with local policy implementation rather than with lack of the Center's will or systemic bias. In fact, the incentives for local governments to follow central directives in areas such as environmental and social policy are weak, while there is intense pressure on them to generate revenue often through non-sanctioned fees and levies.¹¹ However, this set of perceptions holds out the possibility that residents will continue to remonstrate against local officials seeing their actions as justified by central policy intent. In addition, the leadership can draw some comfort from the fact that satisfaction levels have risen over time. The second set of questions turns to look at how citizens view the character of their local officials and whose interests they think they serve.

Serving the People or Serving Themselves: Satisfaction with the Performance of Local Government and Officials

Protests against the unjust actions of local agents of the state have become commonplace in contemporary China and have reached a wider audience through the use of new social media. As noted above, many local protesters appeal to the higher levels of government to rectify local abuse and feel that their demands are justified under national policy. One might expect that there is a greater chance for demonstration and unrest if citizens' opinions about local officials are negative, viewing them as acting in their own interests rather than in those of the people they are supposed to serve. To analyze this, we asked two sets of questions. The first covers the attitude of local officials and their competency; the second asked in whose interests citizens thought officials acted in carrying out their work.

Again we see the same two trends with lower evaluation of the quality of officials at the local level than at higher levels of government but the general assessment rising since 2003 (once more with the peak year being 2009). We asked respondents whether they thought the attitude of local officials when implementing policy was cool and indifferent or warm and friendly and whether they thought that local officials were very knowledgeable (competent) or stupid (incompetent) (see **Tables Five and Six**). In 2011, the view that local officials were very knowledgeable was held by 69.4 percent of respondents, up from 50.8 percent in 2003 but down

from a peak of 74.8 percent in 2009. Not surprisingly, the favorable percentage was highest for those living in major cities (82.1 percent) dropping to 60.4 percent in the towns and townships but rising to 65.6 percent for those living in villages. Similarly, there was an increase among those who thought that local officials were bureaucratic in nature rather than caring for the people. In the surveys up until 2005, a majority of respondents felt that local officials were bureaucratic in behavior but by 2011, 41.4 percent of respondents had this view as opposed to 46.1 percent who thought that they cared about people when carrying out their work.

The stress on “putting people first” and attempts to encourage local governments to be more responsive and take care of those in need seems to be having a limited effect. We asked six pairs of questions comparing government behavior that corresponded to concern for ordinary people or bureaucratic behavior (see **Table Seven**). Although dissatisfaction remains relatively high and satisfaction relatively low all the indicators have improved in this category from 2003 to 2011. However, it should still cause concern, as irrespective of place of residence, large percentages feel that the behavior of local officials is bureaucratic rather than being helpful to the concerns of ordinary people. By 2011, the only two pairs where a majority for the perception of bureaucratic behavior prevailed were for officials trying to get closer to those with money and getting closer to their superiors. However, the difference was considerably lower than in 2003. In 2003, all the categories had a majority that saw local government and its official behavior as bureaucratic and self-serving. These results should not be surprising given the results of a survey by Chen Wensheng on the way key township officials allocated their time. Of their time, only 2 percent was spent on serving the people, while 22 percent was spent on receiving higher level officials, 9 percent on economic development and 17 percent on family planning.¹²

Perception of the attitude of officials in municipalities was the most favorable. In all six categories there were majorities for behavior that could be seen as showing concern for ordinary people, whereas in towns and townships and the villages, under 50 percent shared this view for all categories. In the villages, only 39 percent and 38.7 percent respectively thought that the local officials brought

benefits to ordinary people and had the mentality of taking care of ordinary people. In fact, in all categories except for bringing benefits to ordinary people, villagers ranked the attitude of their local officials the worst. Interestingly, given the emphasis on eradicating illegal fees and levies and only raising funds in line with the law, support for the view that fees were indeed raised legally dropped in all three residencies in 2011 even to below the level of support in 2007. In the municipalities only 62 percent held this view down from a high of 70.8 percent in 2009, in the towns and townships, it was 47.5 percent down from 64.3 percent and in the villages it was 49 percent down from 64.3 percent. There have been widespread demonstrations and complaints, especially in rural China about the imposition of illegal fees and levies in order for local officials to raise funds to cover their salaries and expenses or to fund their often ill-thought out development plans. It would appear that despite the attempts to stamp out this behavior the practice still lingers and is even prevalent in municipalities and towns.

This sets a challenge for the new leadership that will succeed Hu and Wen. Despite improvement, the policy attempts to promote the image of the government as close to the people and concerned about their needs still has some way to go to be translated into practice at the local level. It is not necessarily the case that frustration with local government will turn into criticism and disillusionment with Central government. However, continued suspicion of local officials' intent might lead to broader dissatisfaction with the Central government if the Center is seen as incapable or unwilling to bring local governments into line with policy intention.

What Quality Services do Citizens Expect Their Government to Provide?

The last set of questions deals with the kinds of services that citizens want local government to provide and their satisfaction with the quality service provision. As noted above, it is the local government that is the main provider of goods and services in both urban and rural China. In particular, since the abolition of agricultural taxes, there has been considerable attention paid to the continued role of township administrations with policy attempting to transform them from extractive to "service-oriented" agencies. However, the result of various reforms has

been to “hollow-out” township administrations leaving much of the service provision to the county/district or the village in the rural areas.¹³

One important legacy of the Maoist years was the notion of “self-reliance” meaning that local levels of administration should minimize its dependence on higher levels of government. Subsequent tax-sharing reforms in 1993-94 and the abolition of the agricultural tax in 2006 have added to the fiscal pressure on local governments that still carry the greatest burden for financing infrastructure and providing social welfare. Consequently, a major imperative for local governments is to raise revenues either by seeking transfers from above, hence the large budget for winning and dining,¹⁴ or by extracting finances from the community, hence the large number of protests and demonstrations.

An added burden for local governments has been the new mandates from the Central government to expand pension schemes and the minimum living support schemes, provide free rural elementary education, and to integrate migrants into urban support schemes. These are laudable goals but these mandates are only partially supported by central transfers and the burden on local governments have meant that, on occasion, services have actually been cut or officials have sought ways to deflect the full impact of the policies. In the countryside, policy has been to merge or cut the number of townships and since 1985 the number has halved. However, these mergers have led to the elimination of accessible services since the schools and clinics may be closed in those townships that lose their administrative status. This is a particular problem where the distances are large and populations are scattered, such as in Tibet. In addition, the county still assigns each township a tax quota thus often compounding misguided development strategies that put pressure on them to develop the non-agricultural economy. Calculations vary but it is clear that township debt is significant. More recently, reforms have included county management of township finances and also direct provincial management of county financial management (*sheng guan xian*). The intention is to reduce fiscal management from five levels of government to three.¹⁵

To date, the main approaches for dealing with inadequate revenues have been two-fold. The World Bank and the Chinese government have proposed

improving the revenue stream and thinking about better mechanisms for financial redistribution. Second, there have been a number of proposals for restructuring township government and shifting the financial center in the countryside to the county. In addition to the mergers noted above, there have been experiments to consolidate all the agencies into three to five service centers and transform the non-social service agencies into market-oriented enterprises with services outsourced to them. The management of these agencies could then be assigned to the county level government. It is hoped that such reforms would move township government out of extensive engagement and interference in farmers' lives and allow them to concentrate on providing public goods and maintaining public order.¹⁶

This supports the view that there needs to be a thorough re-think of the role of government in providing services and what kinds of partnerships can be formed to meet policy objectives. A better understanding of how citizens view government, what kind of services they expect and how they prioritize them will help clarify thinking about this changing role of government. Rather than focusing exclusively on the supply side, it would be beneficial to consider the demand side, more specifically what citizens think about the provision of specific public goods by local government and how they prioritize different needs.

The questions relating to satisfaction with the provision of specific public services reveal some interesting insights that are helpful for thinking about what local government could concentrate on to improve satisfaction levels. Generally, there has not been significant variation in terms of those services that the respondents were most satisfied with and those with which they expressed the greatest dissatisfaction. We ranked the responses from four as extremely satisfied to one for extremely dissatisfied. The overall satisfaction index has risen from 2.54 to 2.82 in 2011 but it has dropped below the levels of 2009 and 2007. It is also worth noticing that across all categories for all the years, only nine services have received a satisfaction rating of three or above.¹⁷ Water and electricity provision (3.09) topped the satisfaction list in 2011, displacing family planning (3.05) that had been the top service in each previous survey going back to 2003. The fact that family planning regularly receives the highest rating requires further investigation. When

follow-up questions were asked, respondents said that they knew it was a Central government priority and that there was no point in being critical of the service. However, as we shall see below they did not think that it was an important area of work for the government to be engaged in.

The other three categories of work that citizens were most satisfied with were: road and bridge construction (2.93), the practice of religious belief (2.92), and the management of elementary and secondary schools (2.92). When we followed up to ask about satisfaction with government policy on religious belief, especially in major cities, it appeared that high satisfaction levels had more to do with the fact that it was not important to most people and thus they were relatively satisfied. These services tend to be ones that the old planning system was good at delivering and monitoring but do not relate to the new challenges brought about by reforms. There was some variation depending on where one lived but the top two in all places of residence were the same: water and electricity provision and family planning (see **Table Eight**). In villages, medical insurance was placed fifth, presumably reflecting the expansion of the new cooperative health insurance scheme that the Hu-Wen leadership has pushed.

The five areas of public goods provision that the respondents were the least satisfied with in 2011 were: combatting corruption (2.37), unemployment insurance (2.65), employment creation (2.67), helping families in hardship (2.69), and land management (2.74). By contrast, these are all needs or problems that have been created by the negative impacts of the reform program and for the most part are very much household based (see **Table Nine**). Combatting corruption has always been the area of government work that caused most citizen dissatisfaction and in 2003, employment creation, unemployment insurance and helping families in hardship were also in the bottom five. There was some variation depending on place of residence. While combatting corruption ranked worst irrespective of residency and employment creation, helping families in hardship and unemployment insurance featured across all locales, land management was cited in the cities, tax management in the towns and the attraction of commerce and capital in the villages.

Li Peilin (2010) provides some data for comparison based on the China Comprehensive Survey of Social Conditions. He reports on migrant workers satisfaction with a number of public services provided by local government that allow broad comparison with our findings. Overall, in 2008 migrants were slightly less satisfied with public service provision (58.4 percent relatively or extremely satisfied) than with workers in small towns (59.8 percent) and villagers (62.7 percent). This marked a shift from the 2006 survey when migrant workers' satisfaction was higher. The services in 2008 that they were least satisfied with were: the provision of cheap rentals and economically suitable housing for middle and lower income individuals (46.1 percent), environmental protection and pollution control (46.5 percent) and honesty when performing official duties and combatting corruption (48.1 percent). Satisfaction with environmental protection saw a significant drop from 57.5 percent in 2006. Those public services that received the most favorable ratings were: the provision of quality basic education (75.5 percent), good provision of medical and health services (70.1 percent) and cracking down on criminal activity and the maintenance of social order (64.6 percent). Provision of medical services saw a rise from 59.3 percent in 2006.

To analyze our survey results further we designed a simple matrix that correlated the level of importance citizens attached to certain services with the level of satisfaction with local government service provision. This is an attempt to understand those areas of government service citizens approved of and which frustrated them. The five areas of work that citizens felt government should pay most attention to were: combatting corruption (3.43), medical insurance (3.43), social order (3.36), unemployment insurance (3.32) and employment creation (3.3). The five areas that citizens felt deserved the least government attention were: religious belief (2.84), family planning (3.12), attracting business and investment (3.14), tax management (3.15), and cultural and educational facilities (3.15). Again we see a correlation between citizens wanting government to pay attention to services that are related to the impact of reforms and do not see a strong role for government in overseeing religious belief, family planning and for governments to be involved in attracting business and investment.

Thus, when we apply the matrix we get a list that is much more closely related to the social and economic problems faced by households that are a result of the reform program. In 2011, areas identified where government work is unsatisfactory and that urgently need more attention are: combatting corruption, unemployment insurance, employment creation, helping families in hardship, medical insurance, environmental management, environmental health, land management, drugs and medical services, and traffic management (see **Table Ten**). Since the surveys began environmental concerns have risen up the agenda for respondents. Those services that respondents feel are important and where the government pays sufficient attention are: social order, water and electricity provision, road and bridge construction and middle and elementary school management. It is noticeable that family planning and religious belief fall in the quadrant where respondents feel that government do not need to pay too much attention to it.

The general trends are the same but there is some interesting variation between the views of those living in cities, towns and villages. All see combatting corruption and employment creation as important and not receiving enough attention from government. The most satisfied with government service would appear to be those living in the villages as nine of the services fall in the category of high importance and high satisfaction, whereas for those in cities only one does so (water and electricity provision). Not surprisingly, land management is an area of work that villagers want government to pay more attention to. Those living in the cities would appear either to have more gripes or expect better service delivery as they identify no less than fifteen services as being important and requiring greater government attention. By contrast, those in towns and villages only identify five. The healthcare reforms seem to have had an impact in the villages as this is now seen as a service that is important but that the government is paying attention to, unlike in previous surveys.

Concern with corruption is clearly a major problem for all categories of respondents. It is worth looking at in more detail as high levels of corruption are a problem of governance and a symptom that something has gone wrong in the

management of the state. Given the regular exposure in the press of spectacular cases of corruption it is not surprising that this is a major concern. It is also a phenomenon that eats its way into everyday life as citizens have to pay for access to goods and services that the government should be providing. The pursuit of economic riches without genuine marketization and democratization and where power remains hierarchically structured with information dependent on position and party membership lies behind the corrupt activities of government officials. In our 2011 survey, only 2.6 percent thought that government and its officials were extremely honest (up from 1.2 percent in 2007), while 8.4 percent thought them extremely dishonest (up from 5.2 percent in 2007) (see **Table Eleven**). The feeling that government and officials are relatively or extremely honest was higher for those in cities (42 percent) than in towns (29 percent) or villages (33.9 percent). All of those showed a considerable decline from 2009. Low-income families had the most negative view of government honesty. The main causes of corrupt activity identified by respondents were with economic management (40.3 percent), construction projects (29 percent), within public security and justice systems (29 percent) and financial and commercial circles (28.3 percent). The least corrupt areas of work were seen to be the armed police and military (2.6 percent) and telecommunications (2.4 percent). Most respondents would probably have little contact with the armed police or the military.

Given the attitude of respondents, it is not surprising that they are pessimistic about the government's capability to deal with corruption. 38.2 percent felt that government work and dedication to eradicating corruption was relatively small or extremely small (an increase of 10.3 percent over 2009). There is a greater sense among city dwellers that government is dedicated to combatting corruption (62.5 percent) and less so in the villages (54 percent). Only 3.1 percent of respondents thought that government work to combat corruption was extremely effective (a further 32.4 percent thought it was relatively strong). Again the impression is worse in villages than in the cities. In the villages only 2.3 percent thought the work was extremely strong and 5.2 percent in the cities and 2.4 percent in the towns. Last but not least, only 6.4 percent of respondents had a strong belief

that government work to improve corruption would improve and only 57.4 percent had some belief.

Concluding Comments

The new leadership that will take power through late-2012 and 2013 will inherit a mixed situation. There is clearly much dissatisfaction with the performance of local government and its officials and very few have faith that the government can deal effectively with the problem of corruption. Yet, there is still good will towards the Central government that is not identified with the problems that are seen to blight the performance of those levels of government closer to the people. The surveys confirm the view of others that Chinese citizens do “disaggregate” the state and would appear to retain faith in the central government. In addition, the satisfaction with all levels of government has risen since we began the surveys in 2003. This may give the Central leadership some cushion if it makes policy errors in the future. However, as we have seen in the recent past seemingly stable authoritarian regimes can unravel quickly and citizen frustration can spill out onto the streets. Recently in China this frustration has been restricted to protests against local abuses of power.

Despite improving indicators, there remain substantial percentages of respondents who view the behavior of local officials as bureaucratic and self-centered. They clearly do not feel that the slogan of “putting people first” has become the *modus operandi* for local officials. Neither do respondents have much faith that the government can cure the problems of corruption and they feel that their work in this area is ineffective. What is also clear is that citizens want government to help resolve the challenges that have arisen during the transition to a more market-influenced economy. Rather than supporting blanket services, they seem most concerned that government help with the household-based socio-economic challenges such as employment creation and unemployment insurance.

It will be interesting to see whether the new leadership will continue the approach of Hu and Wen in rejecting substantive political reform in favor of marginal improvements to make the current system function more effectively. As noted, our survey suggests that citizens feel that local officials are not very effective

in promoting the interests of ordinary folk but are quite adept at pursuing their own interests and sucking up to those with money and power. It will be a significant challenge for the new leadership to bring about significant improvement in those areas of public service citizens deem most important without increasing transparency and accountability in local government.

Appendix One: The Surveys¹

The findings and analysis of the survey are based on the results of a purposive stratified survey of between 3,800 and 4,100 (3,850 in 2001). Respondents, aged between 16 and 60, were selected from three administrative levels: city, town, and village. The respondents were aged between 18 and 60 in the cities and town and 18 and 60 in the villages. At the city level, eight sites were chosen based on their geographic location, average per capita income, and population.² The sites varied in all three variables, representing lower-middle income, middle income, and upper income individuals, as well as western, eastern, northern and southern populations of China. Within the cities respondents were randomly selected through the household registration lists using the KISH method.³ At the town and village levels because of the large average size of families, respondents were selected randomly through the closest birthday method. No fewer than 250, 150, and 100 respondents were identified for each city (2000 total), town (1050 total), and village (800 total), respectively. Consequently, the sample has an urban bias, resulting in respondents with higher age ranges and, in some cases, higher income levels than the corresponding regional averages. In the analysis stage, the results were weighted to compensate for both urban bias and relative population size. Thus, for cities, the final weight for cities in terms of weighting for urban was 0.5008 while that for the villages was 2.6487. With the exception of those in the age range of 16 to 19, the demographic profile mirrors reasonably well the national range.

The survey forms contained around 50 questions, with slight distinctions for the rural and urban to address minor discrepancies in income measurements and employment responses. Interviewers recorded multiple choice, binary, and free-response answers. Care was taken to record respondent demographic data when

¹ Unless otherwise stated the details for all the surveys are the same. All surveys were conducted in the Fall.

² In 2003 and 2004 only seven cities were included but in 2005 Nantong was added.

³ Household area sampling according to a 'face sheet' or table with fractional representation of each adult Kish (1949).

available, such as profession, gender, age, household registration, educational attainment, employment status, private/public enterprise or NGO employee, income range, etc. Professional staff trained and employed by Horizon Research Group conducted all interviews. The response rate was around 80 percent for each year.

The sample, by design, does not include migrants or the majority of ethnic minorities living in China. Using the household registration system does not capture migrant communities. Also, the purpose of this article is to compare the levels of satisfaction with local government and certain public goods and services of those living in urban and rural China. In some cases, migrants lack legal access to public goods and services and their responses therefore create bias in the survey findings. Similarly, ethnic minorities residing in autonomous regions live under varying policy frameworks, rendering a comparison of government performance between regions difficult at best and misleading at worst.

The questionnaire was conducted in the two Municipalities of Beijing and Shanghai and the five cities of Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu, Shenyang and Xi'an, with Nantong (Jiangsu) added in 2005. Seven small towns (county level cities) were covered: Zhuji in Shaoxing (Zhejiang, village--Fengqiao), Changle in Fuzhou (Fujian, village--Changxian), Beining in Jinzhou (Liaoning, village--Zhongan), Xinji in Shijiazhuang (Hebei, village--Xinji), Linxiang in Yueyang (Hunan, village--Zhanqiao), Pengzhou in Chengdu (Sichuan, village—Li'an), and Xingping in Xianyang (Shaanxi, village--Pan). In addition, the village of Feng Shuling under the jurisdiction of Wuhan (Hubei) was selected to make eight villages in total.

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Endnotes

¹ Personal observation would suggest lower confidence in official media but admittedly this is among educated elites in major cities.

² This is Zhang Yimou's 1992 movie that traces the attempts by a woman to seek redress of grievance for herself and her husband. Having been mistreated by the village head, she moves to ever higher levels of government to seek retribution for local abuse, all to no avail.

³ For the limitations and uses of non-random samples in the context of China see Melanie Manion 1994. Manion demonstrates how much can be gleaned about a larger Chinese population from surveys that sample in non-randomly selected localities. In particular, one can use such surveys to discuss relationships between variables. However, it should be noted that the descriptive results do not permit generalizations to be made about the population of China as a whole. For further details on the methodology of this survey see Appendix One.

⁴ On rural China see, for example, Lianjiang Li (2004), for urban China see Jie Chen (2004). For the levels of trust in government see Lianjiang Li (2011 and 2012). Earlier articles that have drawn on the surveys include Saich 2007, 2011a and 2011b)

⁵ Chen (2004) in his study of Beijing drawing on three surveys from 1995 to 1999 uses David Easton's distinction between diffuse and specific support. He finds that diffuse support was moderately high, although it had declined over the period. This implies that the system still enjoys a basic legitimacy. By contrast, specific support in terms of evaluation of particular policy areas was low. Our sample survey allows us to look at the area of specific support for government performance in general and with respect to the provision of certain particular public goods.

⁶ Of the respondents, 80.7 percent had a very high or relatively high level of trust in the Party central committee but only 35.2 percent had the same trust in the village party branch and 53.1 in the party committee at the county level.

⁷ This asks about the degree of trust in leaders at three different levels (central, provincial and county or town). Those with extreme or relative trust in the leaders amounted to 85.1 percent of respondents for central leaders but only 67.1 percent for leaders from the county and town level (cited in Li 2012, p. 110).

⁸ The figure for 2009 is from <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjs/ndj/2010/indexeh.htm>. This figure has been rising in recent years despite Hu Jintao's and Wen Jiabao's increase in government support for welfare and education in the countryside as much of the obligation falls on local governments. This percentage is higher than

other countries in the region: for example in Vietnam it is 48 percent, Indonesia 32 percent, and Thailand 10 percent (Mountfield and Wong, 2005, p. 86).

⁹ The leadership under Hu and Wen recognized that some of the problems of social development would not be solved by growth alone. This realization led to the development of a more coherent policy framework based on identification of vulnerable groups that were then provided with targeted support. Policy began to shift from the provision of short-term safety nets to developing a more integrated, comprehensive system. Policy sought to provide greater guarantees to China's rural population and to integrate the growing numbers of migrants into welfare structures away from their homes. Thus, since 2002, experimentation with rural pensions was stepped up, since 2003 there has been a major push to extend coverage of the rural cooperative medical insurance; in 2006 agricultural taxes were finally abolished; in 2007 rural residents no longer were required to pay miscellaneous school fees and free compulsory education was introduced for rural children; and in 2007 the leadership pledged to extend minimum living support payments across rural China. For details see Saich 2008.

¹⁰ A survey by Tsinghua University and *Xiaokang* magazine on trust in government also showed a rising trend. While the level of trust had been 60.5 percent in 2006, it had risen to 67.8 percent in 2012. In contrast with our survey, it shows trust rising each year. Evans 2012.

¹¹ On the issue of incentives for local governments see Saich 2002.

¹² In addition, 32 percent was spent on meetings and 15 percent on work evaluation. Chen Wensheng 2010.

¹³ For an excellent article looking at this trend see Smith 2010.

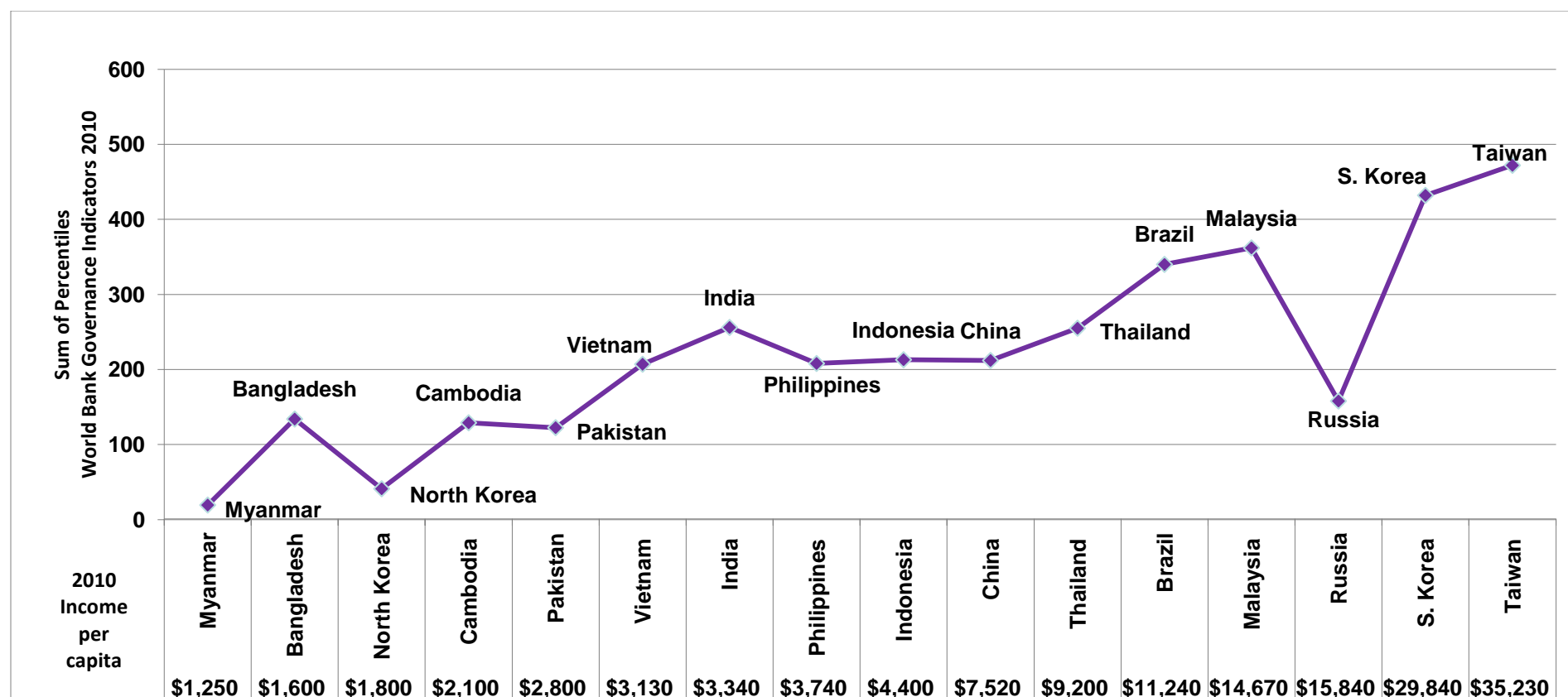
¹⁴ Zhao Shukai estimates that township leaders spent an average of 100 to 150 days per year on receiving other officials and that the cost of "karaoke singing, sauna sessions and mahjong" accounted for some 5 to 10 percent of the township's fiscal income. Zhao 20007.

¹⁵ John Q. Tian 2009.

¹⁶ It is not surprising that in our 2005 survey when we asked whether there were too many government agencies, 61 percent of villagers said that they should be reduced. Fully 87 percent of respondents in the urban areas said that the number of officials should be cut. The preference was to cut those agencies that were seen as most intrusive in citizens' lives and those that they had little knowledge about.

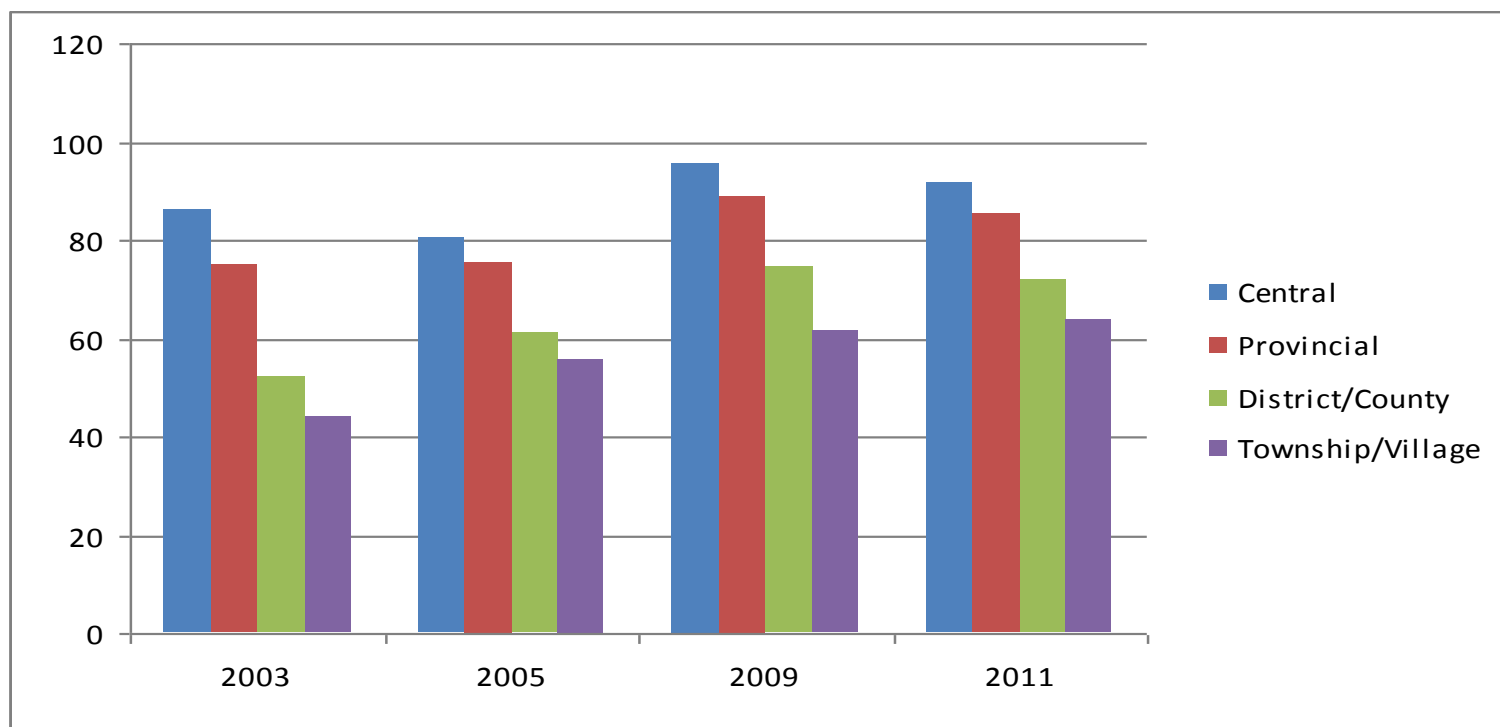
¹⁷ These were family planning from 2005 to 2011, water and electricity provision from 2007 to 2011, tax management in 2009, and road and bridge construction in 2009.

Table One: World Bank Governance Indicators/Income per Capita (PPP)



My thanks to David Dapice for this table.

Table Two: Percentage of Citizens who are Extremely or Relatively Satisfied with Government Performance



Source: Author's surveys, 2003-2011

Table Three: Satisfaction Levels with the Performance of Township And Administrative Village Government or Sub-District Office--2011

	City		Small Town		Village	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Extremely Dissatisfied	69	5.8%	37	4.9%	152	6.8%
Relatively Dissatisfied	332	27.9%	172	23.0%	617	27.7%
Relatively Satisfied	640	53.7%	439	58.4%	1,127	50.6%
Extremely satisfied	122	10.2%	78	10.3%	254	11.4%
No Answer	2	0.1%	1	0.1%	3	0.1%
Unclear	27	2.3%	25	3.3%	74	3.3%

Source: Author's survey 2011

Table Four: Citizens' Satisfaction Level With Government Work 2003 to 2011

Government Level	Satisfacion	2003	2004	2005	2007	2009	2011
Central	Level	3.16	3.11	3.11	3.32	3.41	3.30
	Change	----	-2%	0%	7%	3%	-3%
Provincial or equivalent	Level	2.89	2.97	3.01	3.18	3.23	3.15
	Change	----	3%	1%	6%	2%	-2%
District or County	Level	2.54	2.72	2.76	2.89	2.88	2.86
	Change	----	7%	1%	5%	0%	-1%
Village/Township or Sub-District Office	Level	2.32	2.57	2.6	2.65	2.65	2.71
	Change	----	11%	1%	2%	0%	2%

Source: Author's surveys 2003-2011

Table Five: Citizens' Assessment of the Character of Local Government and Their Subordinate Agencies When Executing Policy

	2003	2004	2005	2007	2009	2011
Warm/Friendly	39.1	37.2	47.2	62.4	60.1	61.1
Cool/Indifferent	38.9	37.9	32.1	26.7	28.7	26.4
No response	1.3	1.1	0.9	1.7	3.3	2
Unclear	20.7	23.8	19.8	9.2	7.8	10.5
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Competent	50.8	47.5	59.6	69.3	74.8	69.4
Incompetent	21.5	21.7	14.4	16.7	9.2	15.4
No response	1.8	1.6	1.4	2.0	4.6	2.9
Unclear	26.0	29.2	24.5	12.1	11.4	12.3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Authors' surveys 2003-2011

Table Six: Citizens' Assessment of the Character of Local Government and Their Subordinate Agencies When Executing Policy By Place of Residence

	Cities				Small Towns				Villages			
	2005	2007	2009	2011	2005	2007	2009	2011	2005	2007	2009	2011
Warm	60.7	72.2	73.3	72.0	40.2	59.8	60.7	52.0	43.6	59.4	54.1	58.3
Cold	23.8	22.4	21	20.7	31.1	33.5	30.1	34.3	35.4	26.9	31.6	26.9
No response	1.2	1.3	2.5	1.0	1. 0	1.1	3.7	2.5	0.8	1.9	3.6	2.3
Unclear	14.3	4.1	3.3	6.4	27.6	5.6	5.5	11.2	20.2	11.8	10.7	12.5
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Competent	72.5	82.3	83.6	82.1	53.2	75.6	75.4	60.4	56.3	63.0	70.7	65.6
Incompetent	9.9	11.2	10.8	11.2	13.1	11.1	9.7	25.9	16.4	20.0	8.3	14.2
No response	1.9	1.3	1.8	2.1	2.0	2.3	4.8	4.0	1.1	2.2	5.8	2.9
Unclear	16.0	5.2	3.8	4.6	31.7	11.0	10.1	9.7	26.2	14.8	15.2	17.4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Authors' survey 2003-2011

Table Seven: Citizens' Perception of the Attitude of Local Government and Their Subordinate Agencies, 2003-2011

	Bureaucratic Behavior				Concern for Ordinary People		
	2003	2009	2011		2003	2009	2011
Stand high above the people	48.2	39.4	42.2	Method of helping ordinary people	30.9	46.8	47.3
Close to those with money	50.1	43.9	44.6	Care about ordinary people with hardships	28.1	44.2	44.0
Move close to superior leaders	54.0	49.4	45.8	Have the idea of taking care of ordinary people	24.5	39.4	43.0
Act in Line with Slogans	51.2	37.4	42.5	Resolve real problems	26.3	45.6	47.1

Primarily take care of own interests	49.8	40.3	41.6	Bring benefits to ordinary people	23.7	45.6	42.5
Arbitrarily collect fees	41.3	17.6	31.6	Collect fees in accordance with the law	31.7	65.9	52.4

Source: Author's survey 2003-2011

Table Eight: Top Five Pubic Services Ratings According to Place of Residence, 2011

Cities		Small Towns		Villages	
Public Service	Rating	Public Service	Rating	Public Service	Rating
Water and electricity supply	3.14	Water and electricity supply	3.00	Water and electricity supply	3.09
Family planning	3.07	Family planning	2.99	Family planning	3.06
Road and bridge construction	2.98	Middle/elementary school man.	2.97	Social order	2.98
Religious belief	2.96	Road and bridge construction	2.94	Middle/elementary school man.	2.95
Cultural/educational facilities	2.93	Cultural/educational facilities	2.94	Medial insurance	2.94

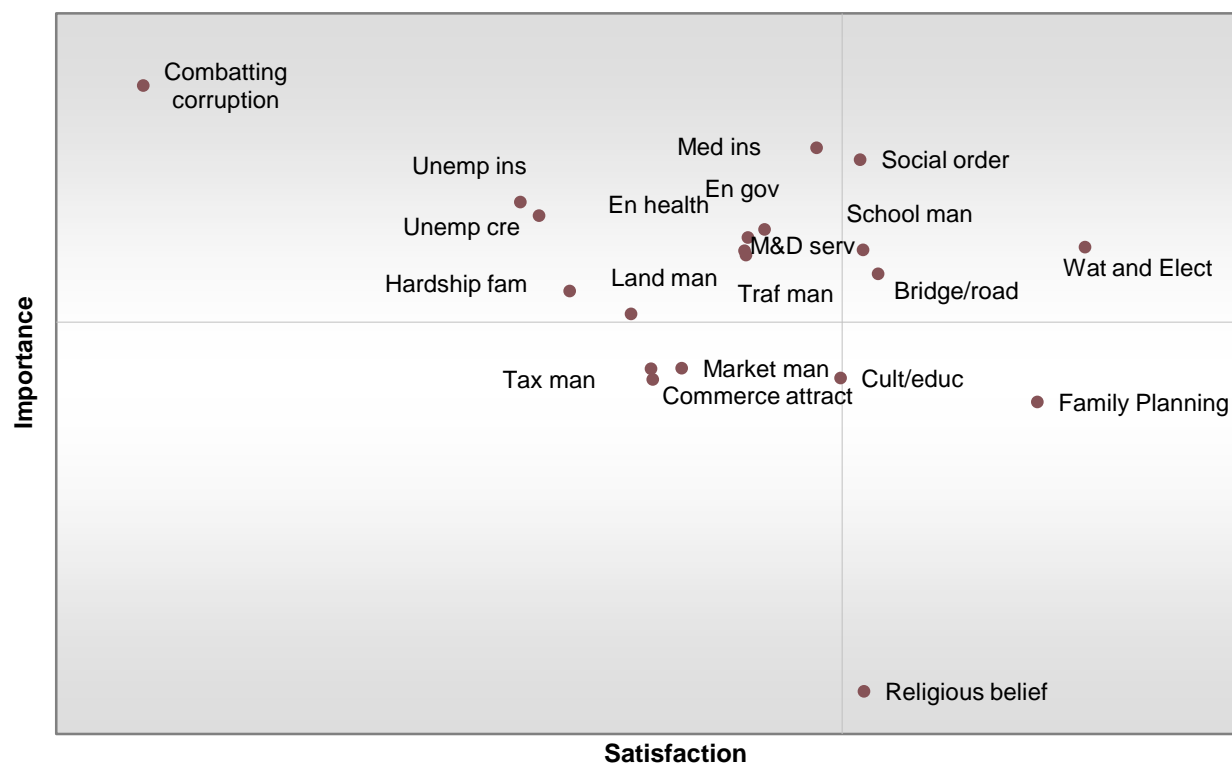
Source: Author's survey 2011

Table Nine: Lowest Ranked Public Services According to Place of Residence, 2011

Cities		Small Towns		Villages	
Public Service	Rating	Public Service	Rating	Public Service	Rating
Help for hardship families	2.73	Tax management	2.78	Attraction of commerce and capital	2.68
Employment creation	2.70	Help for hardship families	2.70	Help for hardship families	2.67
Unemployment insurance	2.69	Unemployment insurance	2.67	Employment creation	2.66
Land management	2.68	Employment creation	2.65	Unemployment insurance	2.63
Combatting corruption	2.44	Combatting corruption	2.30	Combatting corruption	2.35

Source: Author's survey 2011

Table Ten: Satisfaction with Public Services and Citizens' Perception of Importance of Such Work by Government, 2011



Source: Author's survey 2011

Unemp ins = unemployment insurance; unemp cre = unemployment creation; med ins = medical insurance; en gov = environmental governance; en health = environmental health; school man = middle and elementary school management; wat and elect = water and electricity provision; M&D serv = medical and drug services; hardship fam = help for families in hardship;

land man = land management; traf man = traffic management; bridge/road = bridge and road construction; traf man =traffic management; cult/educ =cultural and educational facilities; commerce attract = attraction of commerce and investment.

Table Eleven: Citizens' Evaluation of the Honesty of Government and Government Officials

	2007	2009	2011
Extremely dishonest	5.2	6.0	8.4
Not too dishonest	41.6	42.8	46.8
Relatively honest	40.1	41.2	32.8
Extremely honest	1.2	1.5	2.6
No response	0.9	0.8	0.6
Unclear	11.1	7.8	8.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's surveys 2007-2011